

THE GIANT.

BY WALTER RAMAL.

PETER lived with his aunt, and his sister Emma, in a small house near Romford. His aunt was a woman of very fair complexion, her heavy hair was golden-brown, her eyes blue; on work days she wore a broad print apron. His sister Emma helped her aunt in the housework as best she could, out of school-time. She would sometimes play at games with Peter, but she cared for few in which her doll could take no part. Still, Peter knew games which he might play by himself; and although sometimes he played with Emma and her doll, yet generally they played apart, she alone with her doll, and he with people of his own imagining.

The rose-papered room above the kitchen (being the largest room upstairs) was his aunt's bedroom. There Emma also slept, in a little bed near the window. For, although in the great double bed was room enough, (her aunt being but a middle-sized woman,) yet the other pillow was always smooth and undinted, and that half the bed always undisturbed. On May-day primroses were strewn there, and a sprig of mistletoe at Christmas.

On a bright morning in July (for notwithstanding the sun shone fierce in the sky, yet a random wind tempered his heat), Peter went out to sit under the shadow of the wall to read his book in the garden. But when he opened the door to go out, something seemed strange to him in the garden. Whether it was the garden itself that looked or sounded strange, or himself and his thoughts that were different from usual, he could not tell. He stood on the doorstep and looked out across the grass. He wrinkled up his eyes because of the fervid sunshine that glanced bright even upon the curved blades of grass. And, while he looked across towards the foot of the garden, almost without his knowing it his eyes began to travel up from the ground, up along the trees, till he was looking into the cloudless skies. He quickly averted his eyes, with water brimming over, it was so bright above. But yet, again, as he looked across, slowly his gaze wandered up from the ground into the dark blue. He fumbled the painted covers of his book

and sat down on the doorstep. He could hear the neighbouring chickens clucking and scratching in the dust, and sometimes a voice in one of the gardens spoke out in the heat. But he could not read his book for glancing out of his eye along the garden. And suddenly, with a frown, he opened the door and ran back into the kitchen.

Emma was in the bedroom making the great bed. Peter climbed upstairs and began to talk to her, and while he talked drew gradually nearer and nearer to the window. And then he walked quickly away, and took hold of the brass knob of the bedpost.

"Why don't you look out of the window, Emmie?" said he.

"I'm a-making the bed, Peter, don't you see?" said Emma.

"You can see Mrs. Watts feeding the chickens," said Peter.

Emma drew aside the window-blind and looked out. Peter stood still, watching her intently.

"She's gone in now, and they are all pecking in the dust," said Emma.

"Can you see the black-and-white pussycat on our fence, Emmie?" said Peter in a soft voice.

Emma looked down towards the poplar-trees at the foot of the garden.

"No," she said; "and the sparrows are pecking up the crumbs I shook out of the tablecloth, so she can't be in our garden at all."

Emma turned away from the window, and set to dusting the looking-glass, unheeding her grave reflexion. Peter watched her in silence awhile.

"But, Emmie, didn't you see anything else at the bottom of the garden?" he said. But he said it in so small a voice that Emma, busy at her work, did not hear him.

In the evening of that day Peter and his aunt went out to water the mignonette and the sweetwilliams, and the nasturtiums in the garden. There were slipper sweet peas there, also, and lad's love, and tall holly hocks twice as high as himself, swaying,

indeed, their topmost flower-cups above his aunt's brown head. And Peter carried down the pots of water to his aunt, and watered the garden, too, with his small rose-pot. Yet he could not forbear glancing anxiously and timidly towards the poplars, and following up with his eye the gigantic shape of his fancy that he found there.

"Aren't the trees sprouting up tall, auntie?" said he, standing close beside her.

"That they are, Peter," said his aunt. "Now some for the middle bed, my man, though I'm much afraid the rose-bush is done for with blight: time it blossomed long since."

"How high are the trees, auntie?" said Peter.

"Why, surely they're a good lump higher than the house; they do grow wonderful fast," said his aunt, stooping to pluck up a weed from the bed.

"How high is the house, auntie?" said Peter, bending down beside her.

"Bless me! I can't tell you that," said she, glancing up; "ask Mr. Ash there in his garden. Good-evening, Mr. Ash: here's my little boy asking me how high the house is,—they do ask questions, to be sure."

"Well," said Mr. Ash, narrowing his eye, over the fence, "I should think, ma'am, it were about thirty foot high; say thirty-five foot to the rim of the chimney-pot."

"Is that as high as the trees?" said Peter.

"Now, which trees might you be meaning, my friend?" said Mr. Ash.

"You mean those down by the fence yonder, don't you, Peter?" said his aunt. "Poplars, aren't they? That's what he means, Mr. Ash."

"Well," said Mr. Ash, pointing the stem of his pipe towards them, "if you ask me, they poplars must be a full forty foot high, and mighty well they've grown, too, seeing as how I saw 'em planted."

Peter watched Mr. Ash attentively, as he stood there looking over the fence towards the poplar-trees. But his aunt began to talk of other matters, so that Mr. Ash said no more on the subject. Yet he did not appear to have descried anything out of the common there.

Now the evening was darkening; already a lamp was shining at an upper window, and the crescent moon had become bright in the west. Peter stayed close beside his aunt; sometimes peeping from behind her

skirts towards the trees, glancing from root to foliage, to crown, and thence into the shadowy skies, whence daylight was fast withdrawing. By-and-by his aunt began to feel the chill of the night air. She bade Mr. Ash good-night, and went into the house with Peter. Soon Peter heard Mr. Ash scraping his boots upon the stones. Presently after he also went in, and shut his door, leaving the gardens silent now.

At this time Peter was making a rabbit-lutch out of a sugar-box; but to-night he had no relish for the work, and sat down with a book, while Emma learned her spelling, repeating the words to herself.

"Auntie," said Peter, looking up when the clock had ceased striking, "if Satan was to come in our garden, would he be like a man, or is he little, like a hunchback?"

"Dearie me! what'll these stories put into his head next? Why, Peter, God would not let him come up into the world like that, not to hurt His dear children. But if they are bad, wicked children, and grown-up folk too for that matter, then God goes away angry, and the Spirit is grieved too. Why, my pretty, in pictures he has great dark wings, just as the angels' are beautiful and bright; but the good angels watch and guard little children and all good people."

"Then he's just as big as a man in the pictures, like Mr. Ash, not a——"

"Aunt Elizabeth has heaps of pictures of him in a book, auntie, with all the wicked angels crowding round," said Emma; "but he's much taller than Mr. Ash, like a giant, and they are all standing up in the sky, and——"

"Yes, Emmie, that's in the book. I dare-say," said her aunt, frowning at Emma, and nodding her head. "But come and sit on auntie's lap, dearie; why, he looks quite scared, poor pigeon, with his stories. Auntie will tell you about little Snowwhite, shall she?—about little Snowwhite and the dwarfs?"

Peter said nothing, though his lip trembled; and albeit he asked no more questions, yet he did not attend to the story of Snowwhite.

At the beginning of the next day, Peter woke soon after the dawning, and getting out of bed peered through the glass of his window, down the garden. The flowers were not yet unfolded in the misty air. There was no movement nor sound anywhere. The trees leaned motionless in the

early morning. But towering implacable against the rosy east stood that gigantic spectre of his imagination, secret and terrific there. And Peter with a sob ran back quickly to bed.

However, he mentioned nothing of his thoughts during the day, eating his breakfast, and going to school as usual. But when he reached school he had forgotten his lessons, and was kept in. Even there, alone in the vacant schoolroom, he could not learn his returned lessons, because of all his vivid fears passing to and fro in his mind. As the afternoon decreased, hour by hour, towards evening, he began to hate the memory of night and bedtime. He lingered on, seeking any excuse for light and company, until Emma spoke roughly to him. "Leave off worrying, Peter, do ! How you do worry !"

At last, when even his aunt grew vexed at his disobedience, Peter begged her for a light to go to bed by. At first she refused, laughing at his timidity. But, in the end, with importunities he persuaded her ; and she gave him a piece of candle in his room, to be burned in a little water, in order that when he was asleep, and the burning wick should fall low, then the water would rush in and extinguish it.

It was far in the night, just when the flame of the candle leapt out into darkness with a hiss, that Peter woke from a dream, and sat up trembling in his bed. He had dreamed of a street in the distance, whither a giant became a speck, and the eye was strained in vain. Even yet he saw its undimmed length retreating back unimaginably. And, as if impelled by an influence inscrutable, he got out silently and drew back the muslin window-blind. In

the clear, dark air he saw the row of poplar trees ; he saw that gigantic shade of fear abiding there, uplifted as with a threat, and the trembling stars of the heavens about him for a head-dress.

Peter cried out in terror of the sight, hiding his eyes in his hands. And while he stood sobbing bitterly, scarcely able to take breath, his ear caught a sound in the room like the wintry shaking of dry reeds at the brink of a pool. At this new sound he caught back his sobs ; his scalp seemed to creep upon his head. He looked out between his fingers towards the bed ; and he saw there an Angel standing, whose face was white and steadfast as silver, and whose eyes were pure as the white flame of the Holy Ones. His wings were to him as a covering of perfect brightness, his feet hovering in the silentness of the little room. Peter, his tears dried upon his face, could not bear to gaze long upon that steadfast figure angelical ; yet it seemed as if he was now indeed come out of a dreadful vision into the pure and safe light of day ; and when presently the visitant was vanished away, he went back into his still warm bed, his fear more than half abated, and fell asleep.

In the morning, when he looked out of the window, a gentle rustling rain was falling, clear in the reflected cloud-light of the sun. He could hear the waterdrops running together and dripping down from leaf to leaf. He heard the sparrows chirping upon the housetop, the remote crowing of a cock. And the poplar-trees were swaying their leafy tops in the cool air, as if they also had awakened refreshed from the evil perils of a dream.

